

# Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures

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## MESALC:

### Some Facts and Figures



The Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures (MESALC) makes every effort to rise to the challenge of educating a new wave of students who represent a surge of interest—and enrollment—in the languages, literatures, and cultures of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, an area encompassing almost 1/3 of the world population. MESALC is indeed a model of global citizenry in its mission, composition, and orientation. It has long been engaged in the same discussions that have produced the current global model. It has an impressive array of expertise and specialization among its faculty members: Anthropology, Comparative Literature, Film Studies, Gender Studies, History, Islamic Studies, Language Pedagogy, Linguistics, Literary Studies, Media Studies, Philology, and Political Science. Currently, it has American, Indian, Iranian, Israeli, Jordanian, Lebanese, Pakistani, Palestinian, Syrian and Yemeni faculty members.

## MESALC: SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

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As the chart below indicates, MESALC enrollment (with some exceptions) consistently has been on the rise since the academic year 2002-2003. In academic year 2014-2015 a total of 1,218 students were enrolled in courses taught by MESALC faculty, 721 of whom were enrolled in language courses at various levels and 497 were enrolled in cultural and literary content courses.

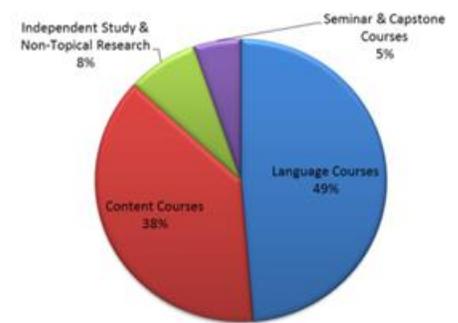
Impressive though this chart may be, it does not tell the whole story. The growth of our majors, minors, and the total number of students we have served the last few years is in fact matched by the increased visibility of our faculty members locally, nationally, and internationally. We also have witnessed the addition of a number of new courses with a transnational and trans-cultural

approach. Acknowledging the vital importance of interdisciplinarity in the College of Arts and Sciences, MESALC is distinguished by its strength not only in transnational, but also in interdisciplinary studies.

There is no other department in the College or at the University of Virginia which teaches at least six languages, from beginning to advanced levels. This has major consequences for the number of students we can accommodate. Furthermore, the languages we teach require many years of consistent study and the ability to place oneself in the language's culture. Most of the languages we teach are of the less commonly taught (LCTL) variety and some are listed among the "most difficult languages" to learn by the Department of Defense.

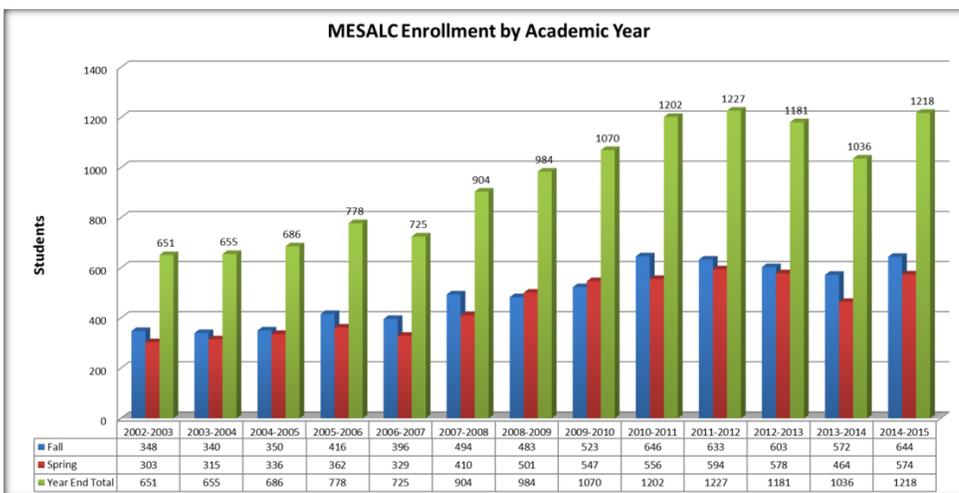
On average, about half of all the courses taught in MESALC are language courses. In fact, even some of our content courses ought to be included in that category.

Courses Taught by Type, Spring 2015



What we have always tried to do is enable our students to understand the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia from within. In order to do that, teaching language in context is fundamental. So, we do not merely teach languages; we teach the literatures, which are as much oral as they are written, just as ancient as they are modern, and more a vibrant part of society than they are in the US. In other words, in the target languages, we teach aspects of culture, especially what is not taught by our colleagues in other departments. These courses are central to our pedagogical mission and programmatic priorities.

Although we have shrunk in terms of faculty members in recent years, we have started an MA Program and take great pride in our graduates.



# Mehr Farooqi

## MOTH

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This story would not be written if she hadn't mentioned the moth. But the moth would not have been mentioned if I hadn't texted her about the race or that I have been on the verge of writing a story for the last twenty some years. My father wrote a story when he was ten.

When I was ten we lived in a house with an imposing neem tree in the front. A large wood apple tree with gnarled branches grew some yards away on the right if you stood facing the house. There were guava and lime trees. A vine with clusters of pink and white flowers exuding delicate fragrance was being trained to grow on a trellis. I could go on and on but I think you get the picture.

I have to mention that there was a row of some kind of lilies quite close to the long verandah that skirted the front. The plants had dark glossy leaves; the flowers were like furred umbrellas, white with a heady scent. That is where I noticed the plump velvet caterpillars; they were sable flecked with tiny orange and white spots. I was fascinated by their segmented bodies, the velvety texture of their skin. They were not unhappy when I captured and put them in a cardboard shoe box with lots of lily leaves and holes punctured on the sides of the box for air. I had learnt about their life cycle.

I knew a moth when I saw one. There was usually one or two clinging to our whitewashed verandah walls at night, drawn by the light bulb. Geckos lurked. I saw one hanging at a precarious angle with a ragged moth sticking out from its mouth. These weren't the moths that circled the candelabras, the *fanus* lighting the gathering of poet-lovers.

Ghazal poetry originated in ancient Arabia and traveled to India via Persia. It is composed of two line verses called she'rs. Its mood is generally amorous and melancholic. The conception of love in the ghazal is idealistic and sensuous not sensual; there is no separation from love and the loved. The ghazal is another universe, another garden. It is a universe where the moth is in love with the lighted candle, the bulbul craves for the rose. When the candle lights up gatherings of poets and lovers, wine is served, the moth flits around, its passion generating energy, a warmth that makes the swan shaped wine jug circulate. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Urdu poet Ghalib wrote:

*Par-e parvanah shayad badban-e kishti-e mai tha  
Hui majlis ki garmi se ravani daur-e saghar ki*

Perhaps the moth's wing was the sail of the wine jug  
the gathering's fervor made the wine cup flow

How does the moth's wing become the sail of the  
wine-flagon? Because the wine jug is shaped like a

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bird, a swan; picture the jug made of moth wings. Picture the moth hurling itself on the candle's flame; its fiery death becomes literally and metaphorically the fuel for the brightness of the gathering. Ghalib plays on the double meanings of *kishti*. It's a serving dish/jug; it can be a boat. Wine is sloshing in the wine jug because of the moth's passion which seeps into the gathering. *Ravani* means flowingness. It is an important component of ghazal poetry. The moth becomes the catalyst for poets' *ravani* too.

The moth sets the *mahfil* ablaze with passion writes the 18th century poet Mir Taqi Mir. The moth is the emblem of lovers. Mir wrote a whole ghazal using moth (*parvanah*) as a subject and the refrain:

*Kahte hain ur bhi gaye jal ke par-e parvanah  
Kuch suni sokhtagan tum khabar-e parvanah*

They say the moth's burned wings were blown  
away  
Burned hearts have you heard about the moth's  
fate?

In my ten year old world moths wings had a special place. I internalized poetry visually. There are no gatherings of poet-lovers lit with candles and lamps with moths' elegant wings. The metaphor of the moth-candle is continued in the modern ghazal with an ironic twist. I leave you to enjoy Ahmad Mushtaq's verse:

*bujh gayi raunaq-e-parvanah to mahfil chamki  
so gaye ahl-e-tamanna to sitamgar aya*

When the moth's light was extinguished, the  
gathering shone  
When those with desires fell asleep the ravishing  
one arrived

MEHR FAROOQI

# James Duke

## A WILDERNESS OF POSSIBILITIES



James Duke

When I first arrived at the University, I had been to India once during high school and carried a vague interest in international affairs, but was not even aware that the University housed a Middle Eastern & South Asian Studies program. I still remember the first day of the first class I serendipitously decided to take in the department, Professor Farooqi's Modern Hindi-Urdu Literature in Translation. I vividly remember the class' first meeting in pre-renovated New Cabell: the allotted classroom was too small, I was reluctant to admit to Professor Farooqi my nascent interest in South Asia (but was met with unencumbered enthusiasm when I did so), and most importantly, I recall that first day's sweeping lecture on the history of Hindi-Urdu literary culture, which left me both overwhelmed and with a rare sense of lucid curiosity.

The three years that have followed that day I stepped wide-eyed into Professor Farooqi's class have proven to be, quite literally, beyond my imagination. The program's interdisciplinary approach has given me the privilege of taking classes ranging from the history of modern South Asia to gender in South Asian film, from classical Urdu poetry to traditional Islamic exegesis.

A WILDERNESS OF POSSIBILITIES  
continued from page 4

The department's professors, whom I have regarded as teachers, mentors, and friends, have been amongst the most rigorous and engaging I have come across at the University. The department's courses have forced us to imbibe the multi-layered, connected, and contradicting histories and cultures spread across South Asia and the diaspora, refusing to be bounded by traditional disciplinary fields. In a world where globalization too often means the flattening of differences, I have cherished the department's deep introduction to a particular region, which has attended to both specificities and global implications.

The program has also afforded us the latitude to expand our studies of South Asia beyond the walls of the University. I was able to spend a summer studying Urdu in Lucknow, India, and while studying for a semester in Singapore, I took classes on South Asia that opened me to entirely new perspectives on the region's role in both everyday life and intellectual inquiry. Back at the University, guest lectures, gatherings with fellow students, and class outings all imbued my experience with an engaging sense of community.

Looking back on my naïve conceptions of South Asia when I stepped into that first class three years ago, I cannot help but think that I still have only scratched the surface. Although now doused in the knowledge of histories, literatures, and religions, South Asia remains in my mind largely an enigma. Rather than finding this disconcerting, I find it comforting. It is a testament to the department's professors, who while providing many answers, have raised even more questions, pushing us to always inquire further and question our own comfortable ways of thinking.

This is not only a gift, but perhaps the most essential intellectual gift one can receive; it is a gift that will continue to leave its mark on our future academic careers and personal lives, wherever they may lead us. As we reflect on our time at the University and carry this gift forward to the futures laid before us, we turn—unsurprisingly—to Mirza Ghalib to frame our thoughts:

ہے کہاں تمنا کا دوسرا قدم یا رب  
ہم نے دشتِ امکان کو ایک نقشِ پایا

*Where is the next step of desire, oh Lord  
I found the wilderness of possibilities to be a  
footprint*

I would like to thank the department and its professors for this gift of continued inquiry and for all they have done for us over the past four years, and to congratulate my fellow graduates on their impressive achievements.

JAMES DUKE



# From MESALC to Amman



Grace Erdmann

I moved to Amman, Jordan, in August of 2014 after receiving my Master's degree from the MESALC department that summer. In Amman, I got involved with a UN project called Better Work Jordan (BWJ). I started out by interning from August to December, and I was hired as a consultant as of January of this year. Better Work Jordan provides assessment, advisory, and training services to garment factories located throughout Jordan. It is part of the Better Work Global program, a joint project of the ILO and the IFC that operates in countries across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

BWJ's factory advisors conduct assessments of garment factories in Jordan based on their compliance with Jordanian labor law and international labor standards, focusing on issues such as forced labor, occupational safety and health, freedom of association, working hours, and wages. Our team of advisors and trainers then works with factory management and employees to

address compliance challenges. We try to improve social dialogue between employers, workers, and the Jordanian government. To this end we also draw on the expertise and support of various local and international partners such as clothing brands sourcing from Jordan, representatives of other countries, and members of the ILO and larger United Nations community.

My main role is to work with the factory advisors to improve and ensure the consistency of their reports in terms of language and clarity. In addition, I produce the monthly communications bulletin that we distribute to our stakeholders and report on the major events concerning the program. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of my job is to assist with programming at the Al Hassan Worker's Center\*. The Center serves mainly expatriate workers who come from (among other places) Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, China, and Madagascar. We offer a variety of resources, including access to union representation, a computer lab where workers can video chat with their families, a small library, a gym and dance studio, a grocery store and cafeteria, outdoor space, and activity rooms that workers can reserve when they want to organize their own events. I provide weekly training classes in English, and the Center also offers computer skills training. A series of health and

wellness courses on self-defense, reproductive health, nutrition, and financial planning was also conducted during the last few months.

I have found the work to be challenging, inspiring, and fulfilling – an ideal balance of office and fieldwork. Gaining professional experience in the Middle East and using Arabic on a daily basis, while at the same time engaging with individuals from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, have been extremely beneficial. I also feel fortunate in terms of my adoptive city. After a rather subdued winter, Amman has blossomed into quite the cultural garden, rife with musical, theatrical, and dance performances, film festivals, art exhibitions, literary lectures, language courses, wellness events, and outdoor activities. Although my current work is somewhat different from my areas of academic emphasis as a student in MESALC, I see them as being essentially linked: by a passion for cultural and linguistic exchange and cooperation; by a desire to tackle new challenges both personal and intellectual; and by the pursuit of further insight into the inextricable bond between scholarship and social justice, academia and activism.

GRACE ERDMANN

# UVA Project Global Officer

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The University of Virginia has a long and highly respected association with the Reserve Officer Training Program (ROTC). The three military services, Army, Air Force and Navy (including Marines) are represented on grounds and consistently produce the highest quality entry-level officers, some often achieving national recognition. Since June, 2009, Richard J. Cohen, a member of MESALC, has served as the principal investigator for the "Project GO" grant at UVa. One hundred seventy students have benefited from the scholarships since June, 2009, which mainly fund summer intensive language study of critical languages such as Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Korean, Swahili and Persian, either domestically or overseas, and occasionally funds semester-long language study overseas. The commitment of the ROTC students to their studies, whether it is purely academic disciplines or military science related, in addition to personal integrity, is a cut above the average student at UVa, who is already recognized to be at a higher level than nationally normal. It is a pleasure working with these students as they pursue their goals. This summer, we expect to fund sixteen students, studying in Jordan, China, Tanzania, as well as on grounds here at UVa. In addition to the regular curriculum offered the grantees, they are rigorously tested in advance of their study and immediately after, in the case of students who have had four semesters of language. Through MESALC, we are contributing Arabic and Persian courses to the Project GO grant, with programs on grounds in the Summer Language Institute, as well as in our UVa in Jordan program, led by Professor Mohammed Sawaie at Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

RICH COHEN

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# MESALC Welcomes

Nizar Hermes

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Nizar Hermes

Beginning Fall 2015, Nizar Hermes joins the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures. Professor Hermes has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Toronto and specializes in Classical and Post-Classical Arabic-Islamic Prose and Poetry; Medieval and Early Modern Arabic-Islamic Travelogues; Medieval and Early Modern Islamic-European Contacts, and North African and Andalusian Studies.

Professor Hermes has taught at the University of Toronto, Princeton University, and the University of Oklahoma and is a prolific writer. He has published "The [European] Other in Medieval Arabic Literature and Culture: Ninth-Twelfth Century AD." Based on his doctoral dissertation, it was published by Palgrave's series The New Middle Ages in April, 2012. Currently, he is working on a co-edited volume with Gretchen Head entitled "The City in Pre-Modern and Modern Arabic Literature" forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press.

During Fall 2015, Nizar will be teaching ARTR 3559: Arab Delights, and ARAB 3559: Readings in Classical Arab Islamic Texts.

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# UVA Summer Arabic Program

I entered the Arabic language program with no prior knowledge of Arabic. I had seen the Arabic alphabet before, but that was the extent of the Arabic that I knew. I did not know how to read letters or form words, let alone pronounce them and create sentences. All that changed very quickly.

My professors had high standards and taught with a high intensity from the very beginning. I spent an average of six hours in class learning something new every day. In the evenings I spent an average of two to three hours doing homework and preparing for the next day of class. At times I didn't know what my teachers were saying or what they wanted from me. I was confused, and I often became frustrated. The work quickly started to pile on with no sign of easing up. Although it was tough, I decided to hang in there and learn the most that I could.

The hard work began to pay off.

By the end of the first week I was able to read and pronounce the Arabic alphabet and was able to form simple sentences using interrogative particles, nouns, and pronouns. The next week I was already learning how to conjugate verbs in several tenses. After a few more weeks, I knew how to properly apply ending vowels to words, depending on their place in a text. My comprehension of Arabic, both written and oral, was skyrocketing. By the end of the eight week program I had learned over a year's worth of study in Arabic, and according to my professors, I knew Arabic grammar better than most Arabs who graduate from high school! I left the program feeling confident in my ability to comprehend the Arabic language.



Kalynn Barlow

When I graduated from the program and returned to my home university, I was able to enter into the 3000 level Arabic class, and even then I entered knowing more Arabic than most of the students who were in the class with me. I would not have been able to skip two levels of Arabic at my home university if I had not gone through the rigorous course at UVA. I continue to study Arabic and have recently received a scholarship to study Arabic abroad in Amman, Jordan this summer.

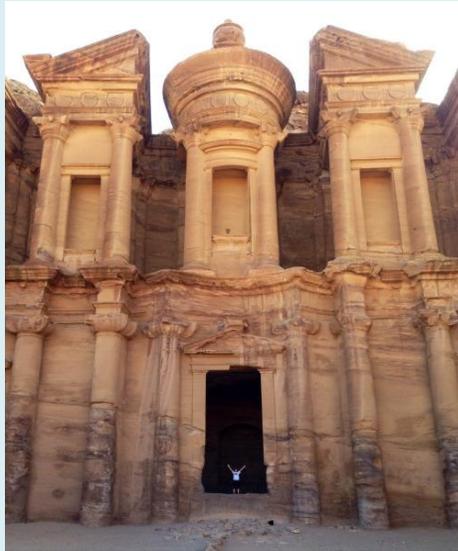
I could not have asked for a better way to begin studying Arabic than through the courses I took at UVA. The intensity and dedication of the professors to teach their students gave me a solid foundation in the principles of the Arabic language. I would recommend the UVA Arabic Summer Language Program to anyone wanting to learn Arabic.

KALYNN BARLOW

# From Exploration to Connection:

## A PERSONAL JOURNEY

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Katharyn Gadiant in Petra, Jordan

As undergraduates, we are identified first and foremost by our majors. For four years, our majors define who we are, what we do, where we study, and how we think. It is thus only natural to assume that we choose our majors for a specific reason. We may study Chemistry to cure cancer or Government to cure Congress. I myself chose Middle Eastern Studies hoping to fulfill a childhood dream: to explore the world.

Exploration of course takes many forms. There is that of the legendary Ibn Battuta, traveling from place to place. Here, we meet new people, learn their languages, and experience their culture firsthand. I had my own taste of exploration just this past summer, led by the fearless Professor Sawaie to Yarmouk University's Intensive Arabic Program. While in Jordan, I too met wonderful new people, renewed my love for the Arabic language, and ate far more than my fair share of *mansaf*. While my travels ranged nowhere near that of Ibn Battuta, they connected me to a world outside of my own.

However, we can also explore the region in its figurative sense right here at the University. Middle Eastern Studies' interdisciplinary approach granted me safe passage between many subjects and authors. Literature, anthropology, economics, I studied it all. The more I learned, the better I understood how these subjects exist in constant dialogue with one another. Yet rather than travel by passport, I listened to these many voices while sitting in quiet library stacks.

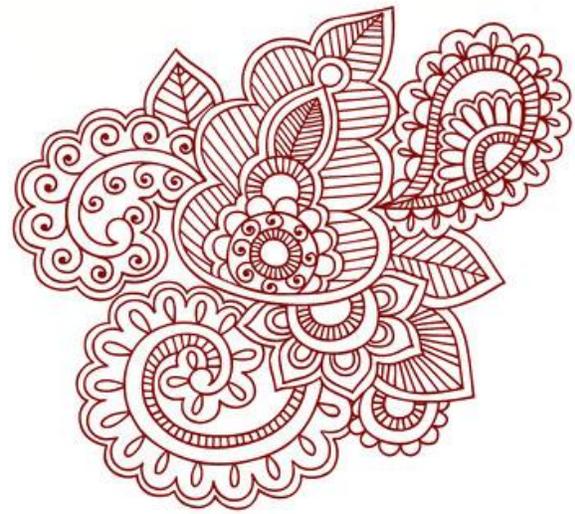
I majored in Middle Eastern Studies looking for exploration and certainly found just that. Yet, perhaps more importantly, this discipline nurtured my appreciation for connections. Whether chatting with language partners in Irbid or reading novels in Alderman, I now appreciate my place within our vast global community. No matter if we are Middle Eastern Studies Majors, UVA students, or individuals a world away, we are all connected. I now graduate with the peace of knowing that I will never be alone, no matter what I choose to explore next.

KATHARYN GADIANT



# NEW COURSES

..... 2015



## **MESA 3559**

### **Classics of Islamic Literature: Islamic Mystical Writing**

*Instructor: Shankar Nair*

This course is a survey of the classics of Islamic mystical writing, spanning from the Middle East to South Asia and the Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Indian vernacular languages. With an eye to both form and content, we will examine the literary productions of some of the most influential Sufi figures in Islamic history, including Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, Mansur al-Hallaj, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Farid al-Din ‘Attar, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ibn al-‘Arabi, Nizam al-Din Awliya’, Mir Sayyid Manjhan, Mir Dard, Bulleh Shah, and others. Literary genres to be covered include hagiography, the spiritual autobiography, poetic verse (*mathnawi*, *ghazal*, *qasida*), *malfuz* (“discourse”) literature, and the epic romance. All readings will be studied in English translation.

## **SAST 1559**

### **India in Global Perspective**

*Instructor: Richard Cohen*

Since the 1990s, India has taken dramatic steps to reform its economic policies and reset its relationships with other world powers. India is the fourth largest economy, currently the largest purchaser of military hardware, an established leader in information technology, offshore business services, implementing aggressive domestic infrastructure projects, and much more. Students will be introduced to a wide range of initiatives in a variety of public and private sectors, and will be encouraged through focused case studies to learn about opportunities for them to discover their own interests, possibly by studying with the UVA in India program. Some of the lectures will be delivered by UVA faculty who have on-going engagement with India through their research. Through this course, students can imagine in what ways they can take full advantage of a learning experience in India and convert it into a career.

## **MEST 3559/GETR 3590**

### **Wor(l)dly Migrations 1960- 2015: Transnational Images of German Multi-Kulti**

*Instructor: Zvi Gilboa*

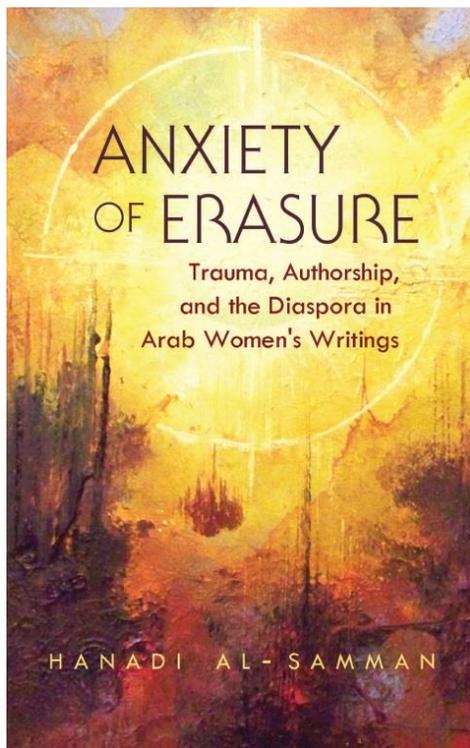
The course will follow two distinct, yet inseparable trajectories. The first is historical and pertains to the overarching social, political, and cultural developments that have taken place in (West-)Germany as a result of the state's migration policies. The second trajectory consists in Germany's multiculturalism, with German Multikulti being a highly charged, continually contested notion, which never leaves the spotlight.



# NEW PUBLICATIONS

## Anxiety of Erasure

*Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings*



**Hanadi Al-Samman**

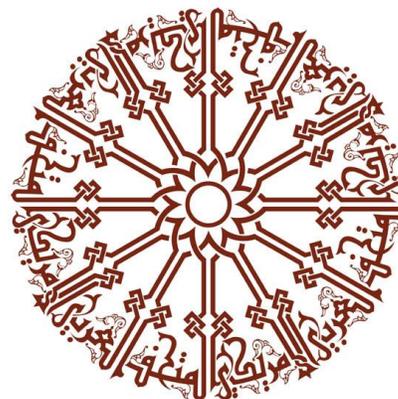
*“Al-Samman’s analysis is lucid and textually rich. . . . A vital contribution to the understudied field of Arab women’s narrative.”*

—Mushin al-Musawi, professor of comparative and Arabic studies, Columbia University

Far from offering another study that bemoans Arab women’s repression and veiling, *Anxiety of Erasure* looks at Arab women writers living in the diaspora who have translated their experiences into a productive and creative force. In this book, Al-Samman articulates the therapeutic effects resulting from revisiting forgotten histories and from activating two cultural tropes: that of the maw’udah (buried female infant) and that of Shahrazad in the process of revolutionary change. She asks what it means to develop a national, gendered consciousness from diasporic locals while staying committed to the homeland.

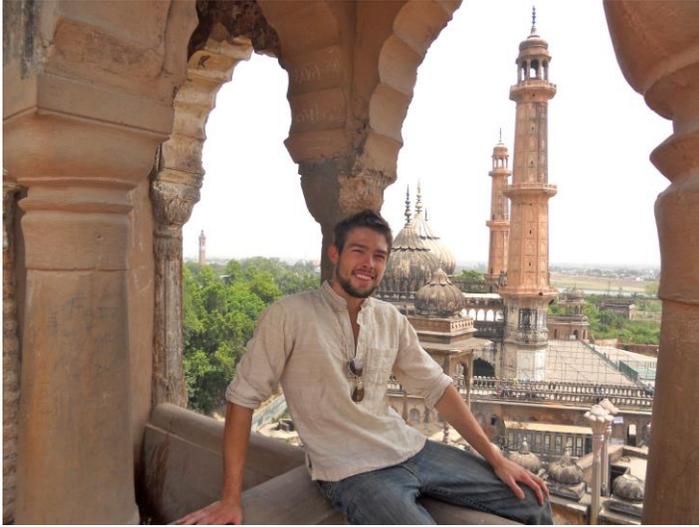
Al-Samman presents close readings of the fiction of six prominent authors whose works span over half a century and define the current status of Arab diaspora studies—Ghada al-Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Hamida Na‘na‘, Hoda Barakat, Salwa al-Neimi, and Samar Yazbek. Exploring the journeys in time and space undertaken by these women, *Anxiety of Erasure* shines a light on the ways in which writers remain participants in their homelands’ intellectual lives, asserting both the traumatic and triumphant aspects of diaspora. The result is a nuanced Arab women’s poetics that celebrates rootlessness and rootedness, autonomy and belonging.

Hanadi Al-Samman is associate professor of Arabic language and literature in the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures.



# John Vater

## WHY I AM IN INDIA



John Vater

My name is John Vater, a 2013 UVA graduate, and my first job outside of college has been to select books for translation at the Hindi publishing house, Vani Prakashan.

Vani Prakashan is one of India's top Hindi publishing houses. Located in Old Delhi in Daryaganj, it sits near Ansari Road, a street famous for publishers, distributors, literary magazine editors, and others in the employ of the written word.

Through a mix of luck and work, I've somehow become a member of this venerable community. I advise on what stories and subjects might attract an international audience, and write up book blurbs accordingly. The idea is to encourage translations, and to expose the world to stories which, for too long, have been supposedly 'covered' by that incredibly amorphous genre, "Indian English fiction."

On the 214 bus to the office, passengers sometime ask in a polite, roundabout way, "What compelled an American to leave home and work at a Hindi publishing house?" When I give my reasons, they smile and nod seriously. "How wonderful," they exclaim, "that an American has come to study our literature and culture!"

My presence must also puzzle my co-workers. One afternoon, they asked why I didn't work in America, where I could earn more money. It was around 3:45. My eyelids had begun to drag after a 'special *thali*' from the neighboring dhabba, *Sughand*. 'Aunty-Ji' swung through the office door with a tray of chai to rescue us from our yawns.

"Because I can write and translate here," I say. "And find good stories for other Americans."

But I omit a large part of my story—my disappointment at not being able to find Indian language works in translation at the local Barnes and Noble in high school, during a particularly turbulent period when I tried to escape from my Catholic upbringing by jumping into foreign literature. Japanese and Russian stocked the shelves, but Hindi translations, for some reason or other, were always missing.

That afternoon, it surprised me how easily I admitted to these twin ambitions. This hadn't always been the case. I could have very easily followed a different path. This led me to seriously wonder—*why* am I in India? This is worth thinking about, since I'd like to convince some of my readers to join me as well.

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When the UVA Board of Visitors tried to force President Sullivan to resign in 2012, a debate ensued about the relevance of the humanities. But long before this debacle, I struggled with a similar debate inside of myself. Out-of-state student tuition was high, and word of unemployed liberal arts graduates filled the air.

Since the third grade, I've been fond of reading and writing. When I started UVA freshman year, I stubbornly decided I would major in English, come what may! But on the insistence of a lovingly concerned mother, I also picked up a more 'practical' major—in the same way one picks up a second life insurance policy.

JOHN VATER: WHY I AM IN INDIA  
continued from page 12

The UVA politics program is fairly renowned, and IR was an attractive choice for others like me. It offered an outlet to learn a foreign language and about the culture of foreign countries, but with a pragmatic end-goal—a job with a think tank, the State Department, or a private contractor in either Washington D.C. or Nova.

So Uncle Sam got my vote along with many in my class. But a January-Term trip to India with Professor Echeverri-Gent in 2011 changed everything. After spending a week in Delhi—and a week traveling between other towns like Jaipur and Agra—I realized I didn't want to study India as a geopolitical unit. I wanted to study India in its own unique complexity, requiring a major in South Asian Studies.

First semester second year I enrolled in Introduction to Hinduism with John Nemeč. Professor Nemeč was known for entreating his students to visit him during office hours. One day I made an appointment, and unloaded my growing anxieties.

"I want to write and learn more about India," I confessed. "But how can I make these interests employable? My parents are spending a lot of money to send me here."

Religion teachers tend to put things in a more philosophical perspective: "Will your parents be happier if you enjoy your work, or if you have a big paycheck?"

So I spoke with my family and switched to South Asian Studies. Opportunities followed quickly after. With the guidance of my Hindi / Urdu lecturer, "Chaussee-Ji", and another lover of literature, Professor Mehr Farooqi, I won a Critical Language Scholarship to study Urdu in Lucknow. With Professor Echeverri-Gent's recommendation, I won a Harrison Award to study Dalit literature in Delhi. Professor Hueckstedt guided my thesis, and provided my first insights into the translation world. Thanks to the tireless efforts of these professors, I won a Fulbright scholarship, whose research led me, one day, to the winding alleys of Daryaganj.

My job is a humble one—translating flap matter, book introductions, and chapter information into compelling English adverts. But at another level, it is also monumental. For the first time, unread experiences, thoughts, and stories will be publicized for an international readership! Perhaps unsurprisingly, my English major has also proven incredibly beneficial as I read through texts to identify those narratives which are not only culturally unique, but which will also cross borders.

With the guidance of the Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures Department, I know many other students will also travel to India. We'd love for those interested in Hindi and Urdu literatures to intern with us and gain a valuable cultural experience and insight into translation, which they could later use to apply for graduate school or one of the many jobs shifting toward an increasingly American-friendly Indian market.

But most of all, we want to make globalization about imaginative exchange, rather than its opposite: the foreclosure of possibility for fear of an uncertain future.

JOHN VATER



# A Glimpse into Refugee Resettlement



Kelly Laughlin

After my third year at UVA, I decided to return to my hometown of Denver, Colorado. Not expecting to find a summer internship associated with my interests in Arabic language and international politics outside of Washington, D.C., I was relieved when I discovered a refugee resettlement agency looking for an intern near my house. As I walked into the squat, run-down building shared with a bank, I did not realize how much this organization would grow to mean to me. I only sat in the reception area for about ten minutes before my interview, and I was already amazed. There were people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, and many other troubled countries all together in the office, each speaking their own native language. I would come to understand that these individuals were among the incredibly small percentage of refugees (less than 1%) whose applications to come to the United States were approved.

I began working in the organization's Family Stabilization department. My supervisor handled any cases coming through the agency that involved domestic violence or sexual assault, mental health problems, child or substance abuse, and legal issues. Even though I am by no means fluent in Arabic, I had studied abroad in Amman, Jordan and had some

knowledge of the regional dialect. I had always struggled with nerves during Arabic class, worrying that my professors or my peers would judge me for any mistakes. Speaking Arabic with my clients at the internship was the most useful language experience I could have asked for. Without worrying about a grade, I focused on getting my point across and forming stronger relationships through a common language. Far from judging my pronunciation and grammar, the Arabic-speaking refugees I worked with were incredibly appreciative of my efforts. While I worked with many non-Arabic speaking refugees as well, I noticed that my relationships were deeper and involved more trust with my Arabic-speaking clients.

Without much experience as an advocate for survivors of sexual assault and child abuse, I was nervous about acting on behalf of these men and women who had been exposed to immense struggles in addition to having lived in refugee camps and losing their homes. While studying international politics can be impersonal, this internship allowed me to view some of the most intimate and personal stories about how civil wars and other political disasters have impacted individuals directly. Reading every possible book about the Iraq war could not have prepared me for working with Iraqi refugees who had lost family members and left their homes. I learned a great deal about the psychological toll of conflict during this summer. After returning to Charlottesville, I continued to work in refugee communities by interning at the International Rescue Committee here. Overall, I could not have worked in these different communities without my background from studying in the MESALC department. I hope anyone interested in working toward peace in troubled countries will have the same opportunity to engage with the individuals most directly and painfully connected to international political upheaval.

KELLY LAUGHLIN

**Rebekah McCallum:**  
*From Charlottesville  
to Montreal*

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Rebekah McCallum

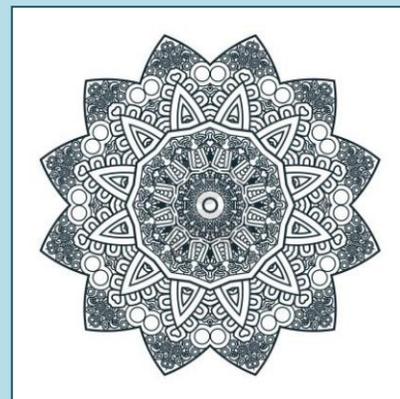
Rebekah McCallum graduates this year from MESALC's MA program. Her final project combines interest in both the Middle East and South Asia. For her thesis, she researched piracy and the extension of land-based sovereignty into the ocean within the context of Indian Ocean trade between Egypt and India from the 11th to the 13th centuries. A major source of information comes from the medieval documents and letters of Jewish traders from the storehouse (Geniza) of the Cairo Ben Ezra Synagogue. These texts were then compared to a modern fictional interpretation of the setting: Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*. In the fall, Rebekah moves on to pursue a History PhD in Indian Ocean World History at McGill University, under the direction of Professor Gwyn Campbell.

BOB HUECKSTEDT

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Hassan, Mahvash &  
Farzad Milani  
Scholarship

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Thanks to the generosity of the Hassan, Mahvash & Farzad Milani Charitable Trust, the Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures is offering two \$5,000 scholarships during next academic year to a graduate or undergraduate student majoring, minoring, or taking courses in the Department. The scholarship is open to both needs-based and merit-based recipients although preference will be given to those receiving financial aid. Eligible students must be enrolled full time. **Please submit a resume and an essay summarizing your educational interest** for the Fall scholarship to Mr. Cameron Clayton at [rcc8k@eservices.virginia.edu](mailto:rcc8k@eservices.virginia.edu) by September 15. The recipient will be informed no later than September 30.

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# Alexandra Shofe

## SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES MAJOR WINS WGS ESSAY CONTEST



Alex Shofe

Four years ago, I chose UVa because of its South Asian Studies program. I had recently returned from my second trip to India and I wanted to truly understand the country. South Asian Studies seemed like the answer. Four years later, I'm still not sure if I have a "true" understanding. That's a good thing.

When I arrived at UVa, I dealt in absolutes: of course the world involved multiple truths but mine was righteous. Knowledge could be easily mastered; people placed under definitive headings. As I delved into my South Asian Studies classes first year – Hindi/Urdu, Buddhist Art, Peacebuilding in the Middle East and South Asia, Crossing Borders – I learned how wrong I was. I learned how little I knew about a country I thought I spent so much time in. The truth was that I had barely scratched the surface of South Asia, or myself.

With this recognition, I started to expand my course selection into literature and politics. I read *Dalit – Untouchable* – literature, learning bits of a long and complex social history along the way. I read Iranian women autobiographies, all compellingly varied. I focused on the Partition of India for two years, trying like so many before me to craft a coherent narrative from chaos. Throughout all of these classes, I was constantly struck by literature's power to disseminate understanding and communicate suffering and humanity. In South Asian literature, I felt closest to the culture and people. Other perspectives were readily available and no book or short story sold the reader one truth. The narratives were as layered and complex as a human, requiring multiple close readings.

In short, I had to seriously work in order to reach any kind of understanding. This taught me to carefully question and consider everything I read or heard. It is okay and necessary to be very close readers. If I remained at my surface level reading of South Asia, I would be woefully under- or misinformed. I wouldn't appreciate the endless complexities of another culture. I wouldn't examine my own culture. I wouldn't be as compassionate of a person.

Aside from these critical tools, South Asian Studies also gave me a safe haven at a very large public university. Every year, I had small classes, recognizable classmates, and familiar professors. Studying South Asian literature rekindled my interest in English as a whole and I switched from Foreign Affairs to English as my second major. South Asian Studies made the difference in choosing to go here and it shaped my experience in ways I could have never predicted.

ALEX SHOFE

# Arabic Conversation Club



Arabic Conversation Club

Arabic Conversation Club serves as a low-stress, interactive space to practice our budding speaking and listening skills in the Arabic language. These weekly meetings are designed for all students with a background in Arabic - including but not limited to, heritage Arabic learners, native speakers, those who have studied Arabic for only one semester, or those who have studied for many years. Not only do these meetings increase our confidence with the language, helping us grow inward, but they also beget more outward growth –developing our community of fellow Arabic learners. With the wide range of teachers and sections available, it is difficult to otherwise meet and interact with fellow students in the Arabic program. This can be a problem because we have a lot to learn from each other. Beyond the academic value, there is added social value in the potential for a special kind of camaraderie through sharing the language.

A typical week's meeting is structured as follows: introductions, free conversation, then games like charades and Pictionary or brief looks at contemporary songs and artwork. If a good number of native speakers are present, we break out into smaller groups to talk about a theme and are provided with relevant vocabulary and conversation starter questions.

I always leave meetings feeling excited about this beautiful language and my new friendships. At the meetings, we try to make learning as casual and comfortable as possible. Working with the language in a space where you don't have to worry about being perfect is crucial to successful second language acquisition. You solidify the structures you learn in class without the pressure of being graded. The intimate relationship you can foster with the language in the club will help you be stronger in the classroom. If there are any gaps in communication, our wonderful Arabic TA Dima Hanna attends meetings to help smooth out the discourse.

Next year, Arabic Conversation Club is excited to be partnering with the Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures by providing more incentives to attend, such as snacks, extra points in class, and more help from faculty. We hope that everyone will open themselves up linguistically to this potentially valuable experience. If you are interested in being a part of our executive board, please contact Lilly Crown at [lkc3va@virginia.edu](mailto:lkc3va@virginia.edu) with any questions, comments, or concerns.

LILLY CROWN



# Sarah Alahmadi

## THE MIRRORS WE PAINT



Sarah Alahmadi



Sarah Alahmadi & Itab Hreib



Hanadi Al-Samman & Itab Hreib

“No, these portray different places printed in my memory.” That was Itab Hreib’s answer when I asked her if the painting full of houses and trees was depicting a village in Syria. I, then, truly grasped the idea of how profound and intimate the process of painting is. It elicits a tint of what is held in our memories, which sometimes are deeply buried in our unconsciousness. Each painting is an adorned spread of beliefs and experiences that are exposed to the interpretation of the viewer, who--in most cases--deviates from perceiving the intended meaning. There is always something to find and learn from in all pieces of art for they mirror our entities just as well as they mirror their makers’.

When I learned that the Syrian artist Itab Hreib was visiting Uva to present some of her art and work with students creating some of theirs, I could not hide my enthusiasm. I was excited to take a look at her work closely; no other experience compares to following the strokes of the artist’s brush on a painting. In any painting, I am usually fascinated the most by those brush strokes. They uniquely reveal the ways in which the artist sees, executes, and emphasizes the motive of their work. For that, Hreib’s work caught my full attention: the strokes were sharp, the colors were garish, and the information was dense. As soon as I arrived at the place, I immediately felt at home surrounded by all the colors, the canvases, and Hreib’s masterpieces. I had the opportunity to create my first painting ever under Hreib’s supervision. I am pleased with it despite its simplicity for it reflects a story; I called it *Taciturnity*. Hreib’s heartened me to paint more often, which is something that I surely intend to do, especially after this beautiful first.

SARAH ALAHMADI

# On Staging Art, Trauma, and Revolutions

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Heather Raffo in “9 Parts of Desire”  
Photo by Irene Young

In our “Introduction to Arabic Drama” class this spring, we explored the development of Arabic theatre from the 1920’s to the present highlighting musicals, realistic, political, and absurd theatre movements.

Our knowledge of the subject was particularly enhanced by visits of Arab and Arab-American writers to our classroom. Students discussed the concept of “*masrah al-tasiys*/ politicized theater,” with renowned Syrian author, Nihad Siris, whose *House in the Forest* (1974) constitutes a perfect example of the persistence of oppressive regimes, and master/slave dialectic in repressive societies. Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* (2002), and its staging in the Department of Drama, availed the students of a unique opportunity to participate in a “dialogic theatre” experience both on stage, and in the classroom. The highlight of our semester came when the students of MESALC participated in an Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures (IHGC) conference on “Unpacking Sexual, Racial, and State Violence,” and painted a mural with artist dissident, Itab Hreib, under the auspices of the IHGC’s Humanities Week.

HANADI AL-SAMMAN

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## Student News

The University of Virginia’s Department of Middle Eastern & South Asian Languages & Cultures afforded me a valuable academic and cultural experience. By virtue of participating in both the Summer Language Institute’s Arabic program and the department’s long-running immersion program in Jordan, I achieved fifth-year level proficiency in only two years. More importantly, the department offers superb faculty who stimulate and challenge pre-existing notions about a misunderstood, but beautiful part of the world. Thanks to MESALC, I am now able to apply my Arabic language and academic skills as an intelligence researcher in Washington D.C. I hope to one day live and work in the Middle East - an aspiration that has not withered since my first Arabic course at UVA.

PATRICK HOOVER



Lilly Crown

Lilly Crown, a rising 3rd year Middle Eastern Language and Literature major, soon embarks on a 6-week study abroad program to Manah, Oman. She was chosen out of a pool of over 200 applicants to be one of the 20 students participating in the SALAM Program (Summer Arabic Language and Media) which is put on by the Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center of Oman. The SQCC funds the entirety of the trip- airfare, lodging, instruction, food, cultural excursions- in the hopes to fulfill their mission of improving US-Omani relations through cultural immersion, creating student ambassadors to return to the US and promote Omani culture and language.

LILLY CROWN

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Department of Middle Eastern &  
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